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ABSTRACT

A resource area in an early childhood classroom can foster children's learning by providing them with opportunities to use a wide variety of materials in a wide range of contexts. This digest offers suggestions concerning resource rooms in early childhood classrooms and discusses issues relevant to children's play. Many classroom areas can be converted into a resource space. For example, pine shelving can be installed in a walk-in closet to hold props. Wooden fruit boxes and cardboard boxes from grocery stores can be used as storage containers. Items discarded by stores and items brought in by parents can be used as props. Once the resource room is set up, children can use the items in it for exploratory play. The items in the resource room may spark their imagination, leading to elaborate construction plans and complex play behavior. The teacher's role in such an environment is that of a facilitator who collaborates with the children in determining the curriculum. In this collaboration, teachers do not try to prevent children from making errors. Instead, children are allowed to use problem-solving approaches to correct their errors and stimulate their thinking skills. Children's ability to pretend, which plays a part in learning to read and do mathematics, is also developed during play. The use of a resource room or area fosters collaboration among the children, and this collaboration helps the children develop confidence in their abilities and skills. (BC)

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Resource Rooms for Children: An Innovative Curricular Tool

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How many opportunities do children in early childhood programs have to become actively engaged in creating their own curriculum experiences, selecting their own materials, and finding new uses for objects? Most early childhood teachers are taught to carefully prepare the classroom environment and plan activities for the children in their care. The tables are set up and the right materials are ready when the children arrive in the morning.

The work of Vygotsky and others has shown that children's ability to construct knowledge is facilitated in an environment where learning is based in a social context. Terminology (raft, mast) and concepts (weight, size) are more easily acquired and better remembered in a curriculum that builds on children's interests (Genishi, 1988). Children collaborate to pursue shared goals that are intrinsically motivating and provide results to their action that are immediately visible (Tudge & Caruso, 1988). In one project at the nursery school at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, children constructed an ambulance out of a box. This creation stimulated high interest among the children, which led to increasingly elaborate construction plans and more complex play behavior.

Children's learning is also facilitated when they are able to use a wide variety of materials in a wide range of activities and in cooperation with adults who help them ask good questions (Duckworth, 1987). These expanded possibilities for children's learning can be fostered by adding a resource room to a preschool classroom. Based on the staff's experiences with the resource room at the Vassar nursery school, this digest offers suggestions concerning resource rooms in early childhood classrooms, and discusses some issues relevant to children's play.

Set-Up of the Resource Room

Many classroom areas can be converted into a resource space. For example, at the Vassar nursery school, a large walk-in closet was transformed into a resource room by installing pine shelving. In such a space, shelves can be placed every 18 inches or so and used for storing small props and materials or for holding boxes and baskets. Bulky items can be stored in large containers on the floor beneath the bottom shelf. Cheap and effective storage containers include wooden fruit boxes, large cardboard boxes from grocery stores, and laundry baskets. Labels should be attached to such boxes or baskets, describing their contents. Matching the objects that are placed in the boxes with the labels on the boxes helps the children learn to categorize and sort.

Once a resource room has been set up, it becomes an extension of the preschool classroom. At the Vassar nursery school, for example, 3-year-olds use the resource room to find materials for exploratory play. When 4- and 5-year-olds come to the resource room, they often have an idea of what they're looking for, perhaps an object to use as a mast on a ship or wings on an airplane. Sometimes, items in the resource room spark the imagination. One child, for example, found a pie plate and exclaimed, "Look! This could be the mirror for our ambulance."

Items for the Resource Room

For a resource room to function effectively, a real collaboration among the school, families, and the community is necessary. Also, a few parents or teachers are needed to maintain and organize the room's contents, and to request new supplies when they are needed. Recyclable items can provide many of the props and materials to be used in the classroom. Items discarded by stores and businesses can sometimes be used. Parents might bring in other materials such as yarn, buttons, plastic containers, paper towel rolls, shells, pine cones, rocks, and feathers. Favorite items of children are boxes, which become many things in children's symbolic transformations.

Often, items that children use at home can find their way into the classroom resource room. An old tricycle or toy can be disassembled, and the pieces placed in the storage room, where a new use awaits them. For example, the handlebars from a tricycle might become the steering wheel for a school bus in one project, and a peanut butter jar become a gas tank for an ambulance in another.

The Teacher's Role

The teacher's role in an environment where children collaborate in creating the curriculum evolves from a "dispenser of knowledge" to a facilitator and co-learner. Teachers closely observe children and their actions, listen to their conversations, and talk to the parents. All this information then serves to set the stage for collaboration between children and teachers in developing curriculum

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and in shaping the environment. The types of questions teachers ask children reflect this interactive approach. "What do you need in order to make a boat?" for example, leads children to other thoughts and further actions. The children might examine books on boats to see what kind of boat they want to make. After deciding, they go to the resource room, find materials to construct their boat, and figure out how to attach all the needed parts.

In dramatic play, children soon become the players. They assign roles, create scripts, and act out their stories. In the course of their play, the function of a boat might change from a passenger boat to a pirate ship. The teacher's role here includes supporting and enriching this type of dramatic play. When children are actively engaged, their social, language, and cognitive competence is enhanced. They also become more task oriented and persistent.

The Role of Error in Children's Play

An account of the preschool programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards et al., 1993), describes the role of error in children's play. As children discuss, argue, construct, and reflect, they make accommodations with their previous perceptions, and their knowledge is accordingly enhanced.

Teachers and caregivers have a tendency to prevent children from making errors, or to point out errors to them while giving explanations: "Scissors won't cut this type of cardboard"; "Those nails won't work on this kind of wood." This tendency is natural, but it is more important for children to find out for themselves and correct their own errors. One day in the Vassar nursery school, a group of children constructed little boats with items from the resource room. They had glued wood pieces together and decorated them. They planned to let the glue dry and put the boats in water the following day. The teacher knew what would happen but said nothing.

The next day, when they put their boats in water, the children watched in astonishment as the boats slowly disintegrated. "What happened?" the teacher asked. "I guess glue doesn't work in water," one child answered. "Let's try something else," another child said. For a second time they constructed boats, using different materials: nails, tape, and wire. Of course, this time the boats floated without falling apart. This problem-solving approach, using resource room materials, stimulated children's use of thinking skills.

Symbolic Representation in Children's Play

The ability to pretend that one thing stands for another plays a critical role in the child's development and in later achievement. "Pretending" is essential in learning to read and do math, and in learning other academic subjects later in elementary school. Play is the main activity during which the child develops this pretend ability. Taking on a role (captain of a boat), pretending that an object stands for something else (paper towel rolls for binoculars), developing a pretend situation (we're on the ocean in a storm), interacting verbally with others, and being persistent (playing the same theme for at least ten minutes), are all indicators of good sociodramatic play, and are directly linked to later social and academic competence (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Conclusion

The resource room in the Vassar nursery school is the children's favorite place to go with their teacher. Making use of the resource room has developed in them a real feeling of competence. They know that their thoughts and ideas are valued by adults and other children. They are not discouraged when something doesn't work, but instead have learned to say, "Well, that didn't work, what else can we try?" The confidence in their own abilities and the skills gained in working collaboratively with others will stand them in good stead as they grow and develop.

This digest was adapted from: Kim, Sonja de Groot. (1993). From Prop Box to Resource Room. *NYSAEYC Reporter* 39(3, Spr/Sum): 1-5.

For More Information

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